

Creating an Annotation

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A manual on writing
and editing annotations

prepared by

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The purpose of annotations is to help readers select books that they want to read. This aim is consistent with, and part of, the purpose of the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped—to make available to blind and physically handicapped readers a library collection and service similar to that available to any reader.

Handicapped individuals have the same need as other library patrons to know about the contents of books before they decide to read. But they have special problems that prevent them from using print library services for information. They can't browse until something attracts attention or use card catalogs and other reference material. They can't hold the book in hand and see the pictures, check the table of contents for material included, nor flip pages to sample writing style.

The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped works to provide access to book information services through book announcements to readers. Annotations are an integral part of these announcements.

Elements of book announcements

In announcements, accurate bibliographic material is the first priority:

- title identifies the book
- subtitle (if any) provides additional information
- author (or editor, compiler, translator).

Also needed is information specifically for our audience:

- book number for ordering
- narrator in case readers have favorites or prefer male or female voices
- medium in case readers prefer discs or cassettes, have only one machine, or want braille
- number of discs, cassettes, or braille volumes to indicate length of book
- reissue (when appropriate) to indicate that the book has been available before; people may have read it or wish to read it again.

Annotations, brief descriptions of what's in the book, are the core of book announcements—the part that gives the content and flavor of the book.

description of the book's content:

- awards to author or book
- sequel to . . .
- part of a series
- bestseller
- warning statements on strong language, violence, and sex.

Such information is available to library patrons who can handle books, most of it on book jackets. People can often determine sex, violence, and strong language through jacket summaries or by sampling a few pages. These elements are frequently more vivid in spoken than in written form and disturb some readers. Since readers cannot sample, they need to be made aware of such content.

NLS uses the terms *violence* and *explicit description of sex* to indicate detailed passages and *strong language* to indicate profanity that is prevalent and shocking. These phrases incorporate the word "some" if some sexually explicit language is used or descriptions are provided, or violence occurs but is not frequent or detailed, or if the amount of profanity is slight: *some violence, some strong language, some descriptions of sex.*

Considering
Content

An annotation covers the scope of the book and the author's approach—either directly through statements or indirectly through tone and style—and gives readers enough information to make their own judgments. It does not say “this is a good book”; it shows that. Good annotation writing doesn't declare itself; it is good because it doesn't intrude on content, but complements it.

An annotation should:

- reflect content
- interest readers
- avoid judgments.

The announcement as a whole should be

- bibliographically accurate
- stylistically correct
- written for audio as well as visual readability.

An annotation is *not a review*. A review gives general information about content, considers the author's intent, and comments on success. It expresses a personal point of view and is always signed, either individually or in a list of editors.

An annotation is *not an abstract*. An abstract gives a condensed version of total content. It's generally used for technical works and shows the problem tackled, method of procedure, and conclusions drawn. Total content is more information than readers need; too many facts can kill interest, rather than arouse it.

Different types of books need different approaches for annotations. Some are harder to annotate than others and some have particular things to include and particular traps to avoid.

The basic divisions are fiction and nonfiction, and the annotation should make these categories clear. Placement in the appropriate section of *Talking Book Topics* or *Braille Book Review* will help make the distinction for readers.

Although network librarians can easily identify placement from the cataloging information, they and all others who have reason to use the annotation in other presentations (selection cards, book cards, microfiche, etc.) should be able to distinguish fiction from nonfiction without referring to this information. The annotation should be written from different premises for fiction and nonfiction and consequently should sound different.

Fiction

Give enough information to show the tone of the book, the general plot elements, and the characters involved. Use the language of the annotation to pique the reader's imagination. Prefer present tense and active voice. Don't simply summarize the plot, and never disclose the ending.

Unacceptable: . . . She nurses her loving and unselfish mother through terminal illness, has an unhappy love affair, and finally marries a farmer.

Comment: Gives away too much

plot without exciting interest. The reader shouldn't be told what "finally happens" in a novel.

Unacceptable: Lawyer-detective Anthony Maitland defends a jewelry shop clerk accused of the theft of a fortune in jewels and of murdering his employer. Though the evidence is strongly against the clerk, Maitland's courtroom skill influences the jury favorably.

Comment: The last sentence might just as well say, "The butler did it." Why read the book?

Do disclose the ending—and the beginning—as soon as possible: the readers need to see premise and conclusion. The interest is in how the author got from one to the other; how he substantiated his argument. Make sure that the premise presented is the author's; don't become involved in the discussion.

For all books, but particularly for nonfiction, phrases that indicate currentness of a book should be avoided. An annotation may still be used years after it is written. Books announced in *Talking Book Topics* and *Braille*

Book Review are announced again with the same annotation in two-year cumulative catalogs. The book remains in the collection and the annotation on the microfiche for several years. Some books are reissued, and the original annotation should still be appropriate.

Use specific dates or decades, or tie the annotation to events with a familiar time frame. Avoid such phases as:

from . . . to the present time
using recently discovered material
new research shows
newly released papers.

Escapist fiction: westerns; gothics, romances; family sagas; historical novels; adventure stories; science-fiction; detective, mystery, suspense

Probably the largest part of the material in our collection, or any general public library collection, falls into this category. These books are for fun, relaxation, getting away.

Many of these books are written to a formula

- Beautiful heroine and handsome hero meet; something or someone keeps them apart for 200 pages; they finally get together (gothics, romances, some historical novels, some mysteries).
- Hero and heroine get together in

the first chapter and have trouble with their relationship(s) for 300 or more pages (contemporary novels).

- Stern, lonesome male struggles against outside forces and his own isolation; he eventually wins out (westerns, adventures, some historicals, some science fiction).
- Someone is murdered; suspects abound; and the detective, or other protagonist, must—and will—discover the murderer (mysteries).
- Someone (usually the protagonist) is about to be killed. Alternatively, the world and all of

locate the source of danger and avoid that fate? (suspense novels)

Such material is among the easiest to annotate. The basic concern is to show what happens or who is involved in this book that makes it different from other books of the same kind. Since the author had the same problem—making this book different in some way—look for his plot or character twist and emphasize it.

Some fine books have been developed from such formulas; some authorities argue that there

variation on one of them. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is plotted around what keeps a beautiful heroine and a handsome hero apart; *Shane* is a western utilizing the stern, lonesome male as its central character. Both books are generally considered as classics—because of what the authors made of the basic plot elements. Annotations for such books should not be simply summaries of plot. Incorporate plot elements but stress presentation.

Classics

Annotations for familiar books, classics both old and new, must be handled carefully. The subject is well-known and people feel strongly about the contents of the annotation. Thought is needed to determine and express factors that make some books exceptional.

The Glass Menagerie: A Play
by Tennessee Williams

Annotation: A play about the

remnants of a Southern family with pretensions to gentility. The plot centers on the crippled daughter who lives in her dream world with a symbolic collection of fragile glass, in vivid contrast to the family's slum apartment.

Comment: The background, characters, setting, theme (fantasy vs. reality), and symbolism are there. There is no attempt to summarize the plot, which is not the important element of this play.

Bestsellers

Current bestsellers have been widely reviewed and annotated in other sources. The authors are probably doing the talk-show

circuit promoting their books and are available in the reader's living room at a flick of the TV switch. Friends and family members may

sons between what they already know about the book and what the annotation tells them, the annotation should receive careful consideration and be as full, ac-

priate, except possibly for how-to books—and even those could use some explanation of how this one is different (and presumably better, since it is selling wildly).

Children's books

Basically, language and construction are the same as for adult books, but vocabulary is simpler. More character names can be used, since they are usually chosen by the author to be appealing. Content should relate to the child's experience and appeal to the imagination.

Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing
by Judy Blume

Annotation: Peter Hatch resigns himself to losing the battle for attention with his two-year-old brother. Little Fudge ruins Peter's special poster, gets lost at the movies, and eats Peter's pet turtle. For grades 3–5.

Comment: Including some of Fudge's antics lets a child know exactly what Peter must contend with and hints at humor. A child might be motivated to read the book because he identifies with Peter or because he wants to find

out how Peter handles the problem.

Hot as an Ice Cube
by Philip Balestrino

Annotation: Clear text and simple experiments present basic information about heat, which exists in everything—even in ice cubes. For grades K–3.

Comment: Strictly speaking, the mention of ice cubes is not essential. The rest of the annotation is pretty dry, however, and the ice cubes add ironic punch. For grades K–3.

The Mitten: An Old Ukranian Folktale
by Alvin Tresselt

Annotation: On the coldest day of winter, a little boy's lost mitten becomes the shelter for a mouse, a frog, an owl, a rabbit, a fox, a wolf, a boar, and a bear!

whom like stories about animals, and it creates wonder about how all the animals crowd into one mitten. Young children like the cumulative effects of long lists of things; an adult would probably try to keep track.

Curious George Flies a Kite
by Margaret E. Rey

but the kite pulls the mischievous little monkey way up in the sky!

Comment: Children thrill to the switch here—the kite flying the monkey instead of the monkey flying the kite. The idea is both titillating and scary. And of course, they want to know how George gets down.

Biographies/memoirs

Such books are primarily non-fiction, but occasionally a novel can be a thinly disguised memoir and fictionalized biographies are quite common. If the bibliographic information is not sufficiently clear, make sure that the annotation explains (“fictionalized biography of . . .,” “based on personal experience”).

For biographies, give the authority of the author when it has a bearing. For memoirs, the author’s name is sufficient authority but an identifying word or phrase is helpful (actress, statesman, evangelist). Avoid inserting superlatives into

these identifying phrases; if the person is indeed “one of the world’s most famous . . .,” he/she doesn’t need such a wordy label. More information is needed for memoirs that are related to a personal experience of an unfamiliar person.

Keep the annotation balanced by summarizing the total approach and scope. Don’t use all the space for background and early years, even though those may be the least familiar areas of the subject’s life, unless that is the emphasis of the book.

How-to’s/practical guides

The annotation should give an overview of the book’s content and note any background of the author that has a bearing on his expertise. It can be short if the title and

subtitle are close to a full explanation, but it cannot be omitted because the omission looks like a mistake.

A description of the requirements for the Boy Scout merit badge in gardening.

If there are special sections, indexes, or summaries, the annota-

cludes" for publications that have separate sections on particular subjects. For content description use "covers," "describes," "explains," "explores," or an appropriate synonym.

Anthologies

Collections are popular with many readers; they like material broken into segments that can be read at one time. This fragmentation of material makes it difficult to give an overall picture of the book. There is no space for annotating individual stories, essays, or poems; therefore, the whole collection must be described in general terms, with specifics that can capture interest.

Poetry

Books of poetry are probably the most extreme example of fragmented material. They cover—most often—long periods of time in the poet's thinking and development, many different thoughts with different treatments, and some images and ideas concisely expressed. The innate nature of the material makes for slow reading and the concepts are extremely hard to express in a brief annotation.

Don't fall back on vague phrases

about "love and life" that could mean anything, and could apply to almost any poetry collection. Be specific. Look for a unifying theme, or summarize two or three representative subjects and approaches. Mention titles that may be familiar, but offer more than a list.

Collected Poems 1919–1976
by Allen Tate

Roughly chronological arrangement of poems written over almost six decades by the classicist and critic. Subjects range through the emotion of "Death of Little Boys," memories of Southern boyhood in "The Swimmers," and reflections on the futility of war in "Ode to the Confederate Dead."

Short stories/essays

Collections of any kind have the same problem of fragmentation—too many subjects, although not to the same degree as poetry. In

theme or list two or three representative ones. Frequently the collection will be built around a theme covered in the title or subtitle and all that is needed is some explanation or enlargement.

Tell how many stories, essays, or articles are included; the number will give the reader some idea of the length of each. When one piece is familiar, be sure it is listed. If short stories are interrelated, say so. When different authors are represented, select a few of the most popular for mention.

Sex, violence, and strong language

Warning statements about strong language, violence, and explicit descriptions of sex are hard to apply to collections; they may be needed for only one story or a

reader who is concerned with avoiding these subjects might be deprived of much they would enjoy if the whole book were given a warning label. In these cases, the information is better incorporated into the annotation. Sometimes both notations may be needed, with the information within the description indicating where this material is found.

Amen

by Yehuda Amichai

Israeli poet mingles simplicity and directness in poems on the Jewish experience of alienation and the constant threat of war. *Collection also contains intense and erotic love poems.* Some explicit descriptions of sex.

Humor

Books intended to evoke a laugh, or at least a smile or two, can be in either the fiction or nonfiction categories. Nonfiction books are most often collections of essays and subject to the same problems as other collections. Fiction books usually involve odd characters in improbable situations. In either case, the situation should be described, not pronounced as "funny." There are many types of humor that can be described:

parody, satire, slapstick, dark. Give examples that evoke the flavor of the book and use language to intensify the image.

Descriptive adjectives are acceptable; judgmental ones are not. A descriptive adjective applies to the author's intent or approach to the subject; a judgmental adjective tells what the writer thinks about it. The author can intend to be "humorous"; how well he succeeds is up to the reader to determine.

Writing an Annotation

writers can't just plunge in and write something; they have to know where they are going and why. Creating a good annotation takes thinking and planning. There are five steps, which will take varying amounts of time depending on the content of each book.

- **Study** what the book is about
- **Select** information to include
- **Structure** order of presentation
- **Choose** language
- **Write**

Note that writing is the last step!

Sources

A multitude of sources exist for obtaining information that could be used in an annotation. These include prepublication announcements; reviews in newspapers, magazines, and professional journals; listings in book digests and similar reference material; the book jacket, table of contents, and index; and the book itself. These materials have varying degrees of usefulness, depending on the nature, importance, and publication date of the book.

Reviews

Some of the information in prepublication announcements can be useful. The primary sources for such reviews are *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus Review*, trade magazines that describe books soon-to-be-published and give information about promotional campaigns that could influence demand.

The reviews are intended for the professional who has to select books for a collection. They are not designed to be totally objective about the worth of a book, but to alert librarians, booksellers, and other people involved in book selection as to what may be in demand. They contain basic

information about the book's content and also opinions as to its worth and guesses about its potential sales.

For example:

this book is not up to the author's previous standards but might sell on the strength of the last hit potential hit among the most specious of the proliferating publications supposed to offer advice to casualties of the sexual revolution

Other reviews become available upon or after publication; *Library Journal*, *Book List*, and the *New York Times* book section are usual references. Reviews from these sources are for the most part signed articles, a practice that gives an indication of the background of the reviewer and the basis for his/her opinions. *Library Journal* reviewers for nonfiction tend to be from college faculties or specialists working in the subject area of the book; for fiction they are usually librarians. *Book List* primarily utilizes its own editorial staff for reviews. The *New York Times* often uses reviewers who have written books on similar subjects,

of information, but using them requires careful selection of material to transmit to the reader. Information gleaned from reviews has to be concerned with facts and content, not opinion.

Reviews are supposed to make judgments; annotations are not.

Book digests

Reference material of this kind is not sufficiently timely to cover current books. For older selections, such digests can be most helpful. Particularly valuable is *Book Review Digest*, which gives a brief description of the book and lists several excerpts from critical reviews. The Wilson catalogs also use this format. Digests do sometimes contain errors; be sure they are describing the correct book.

Special-interest sources, both current magazines and cumulative digests, are utilized for some material: books on religion, detective stories, science fiction, etc.

Book jackets

These summaries are part of the promotion of the book. People browsing through bookstores read them and are tempted into buying (or so the publishers hope). They sometimes misrepresent content,

into the content of the book has to be made before any book-jacket information can be used. Book-jacket information should not be ignored, merely approached warily. It should never be copied for annotations.

Information on the back of paperbacks is even more suspect. These books are sold everywhere—newsstands, drugstores, supermarkets—and the publishers want pictures, colors, and words that will catch the attention of a potential buyer who came in to do the week's marketing or wanted to grab something to read on the bus. The teasers on the backs of paperbacks often have only a remote kinship with the book's contents; they are generally useless for writing annotations.

The book

It would not be cost-effective for the writer to read every word of every book before writing an annotation. But books do have to be skimmed for content and tone of writing. For nonfiction, the table of contents, introductions, and postscripts are good guides. All books have to be checked carefully for sex, strong language, and violence.

Information from all these sources should indicate common elements. If two reviews and the book jacket say that the book is a futuristic science-fiction novel, then the book is most likely to be a futuristic science-fiction novel. Such fundamental information should set the tone for the annotation.

Isolated points of interest or background facts that one reviewer picks out—but go unmentioned anywhere else—are unlikely to be the main emphasis of the book; these should probably be discounted for use in the annotation. When all this information is considered together, the main thrust

of the book should be clear. Details on subject, author, theme, plot, setting, and characters can then be selected to give flesh to the annotation.

Using well-written phrases from any of these sources is a tempting procedure; it's a shame to let good words go to waste. But it is reasonable only if these phrases truly describe the book, deserve emphasis, and fit together. A cut-and-paste job of words lifted out of context can be misleading—or convey no meaning at all.

Don't plan or write anything until all sources have been consulted!

Select what to include

Content is fundamental. A misleading annotation may lead a reader to ignore a book that he or she would enjoy—a loss to the reader. A misleading annotation may lead to selection of a book that disappoints—making the reader wary about future selections. Either way, the annotation fails in its purpose.

First consider the type of book:

- light reading for pleasure
- practical guide
- overview of/introduction to
- in-depth study

- fiction with serious theme.

These five categories provide a skeleton for working purposes; they encompass most of the books for which annotations have to be written. Some types of material are not listed and some books escape categorization. Annotation writers have to be flexible.

Annotations are generally easier to write for books in the first three categories: their purpose is simple, their construction is rarely complex, and their message is straightforward. Plan to spend

categories.

After consulting sources, jot down notes about the book. Don't arrange them, just make a list. Use the book to verify that names, dates, and places are accurate and spelled correctly. Don't adorn the information; language comes later. Notes should cover what is necessary or important about the particular book. They will be different, depending on the type of book. What should be included in the annotation will be different, depending on the category. Notes should cover:

- **Who** is essential to this book?
- **What** is it about?
- **When** does it take place?

- **Why** was it written or is it useful?

These are the six questions drummed into reporters with a slight revision of emphasis because of the difference in purpose. "How" does not always need to be answered for a news article; for books, and therefore annotations, how the author develops his idea is what makes one book different from another.

Not all of these questions should be answered for every book, but they do contain the raw material from which annotations are made. All should be considered for notes and some should be selected for the annotation.

Structure what is to be presented

Use the annotation to give new information; limited space shouldn't be used to repeat what can be learned from the title and subtitle. Repetition is dull in print, wasteful in braille, and deadly when recorded.

Structured notes will help the writer build the annotation properly, usually from the general to the specific. They should identify what must be included and insure that equal concepts are given equal weight. Structuring will prevent omitting the point of the book,

distorting the emphasis, or developing one aspect to the exclusion or subordination of others equally important.

The annotation should:

- explain or indicate the major emphasis
- include essential but secondary information
- provide supportive detail for interest.

Number notes (1), (2), or (3) according to whether facts are major, secondary, or supportive. Many items are supportive details

essential but secondary and can be numbered (2); only one is a major emphasis, although there can be two items under this heading if there is a premise and a conclusion.

enough. Too many groupings and subgroupings are time consuming and will result in an over-complex annotation.

Choose language

Language is chosen before it is written, even though the two acts may seem to be simultaneous; writers decide what word to use before they write it down. Language for annotations should be interesting, specific, and non-judgmental. Words chosen should fulfill two related objectives. They should

- transmit specific content
- capture the flavor of the book.

Every word in an annotation should be valuable. Readers don't have infinite time or patience to wait for the point to be made; length is a consideration for selection cards and book cards; space for printing, braille, and recording annotations is limited.

Before selecting words, consider some aspects of language!

Verbs

Verbs are action words; they describe what happens. Annotations that relate something happening are much more interesting than those that give generalizations about background or contents. Use active voice for vigor, boldness, and brevity. Choose one tense, preferably present.

Life after Life

by Raymond A. Moody, Jr.

Annotation: A philosopher-doctor⁽¹⁾ *synthesizes* the experience of more

than fifty people who ⁽²⁾*have been declared* clinically dead and then ⁽²⁾*resuscitated*. Their similar accounts ⁽³⁾*suggest* to the author existence after death.

Comment: (1) Main verb of sentence—active voice and present tense. Word well chosen for the act of putting many things together.

(2) Verbs for dependent clause show action prior to that of the main verb. Words have precise meaning intended.

(3) Main verb of sentence—active

book, even though the author considered and chose his topic before he began writing.

The Romance of Atlantis
by Taylor Caldwell with Jess Stearn

Annotation: According to the author, this novel ⁽¹⁾was written when she was twelve and ⁽¹⁾based on her former life in Atlantis.
(1) Compound verb; passive voice,

notation, although the last phrase and the title suggest that something happened in the author's life or imagination that may be reflected in the book.

These two annotations are on similar subjects. One creates interest and the other kills it. The difference lies with the care taken in selection of facts and use of verbs to describe them.

Nouns

Nouns identify who and what. Choose nouns to incorporate as much information as possible, since brevity is a necessity and precision aids interest. "Bachelor" is better than "unmarried man." Nouns that incorporate a description convey vitality through succinctness; they also leave space for adjectives that add more force or new information.

The Case of the Glamorous Ghost
by Erle Stanley Gardner

Annotation: ⁽¹⁾Amnesia, ⁽¹⁾blackmail, and ⁽¹⁾jewel-smuggling provide the ⁽²⁾background for a ⁽²⁾murder in which ⁽³⁾Perry Mason, for once, knows less than the ⁽³⁾prosecutor.

Specifics: (1) The sentence has a triple subject; the three nouns sum

up the elements of the plot.

(2) These two nouns continue to set the scene.

(3) These two nouns identify the conflict; the protagonist by well-known name and the antagonist by function.

Comment: This short annotation utilizes seven nouns; most of the remaining words provide connections. What more is needed for a Perry Mason mystery?

Names

Using proper nouns, names of people and places, requires careful consideration. The foremost concern is accuracy; places and characters should be identified correctly and spellings double-checked.

Run, River, Run: A Naturalist's Journey Down One of the Great Rivers of the West
by Ann Zwinger

Annotation: Detailed descriptions of the ⁽¹⁾sights, ⁽²⁾smells, and ⁽³⁾sensations of the magnificent ⁽⁴⁾Green River from its ⁽⁵⁾source in Wyoming to its ⁽⁶⁾confluence with the Colorado in Utah. Zwinger covered all 730 miles of the river on ⁽⁷⁾foot and by ⁽⁸⁾canoe, ⁽⁹⁾raft, and ⁽¹⁰⁾plane.

Comment: (1) With that title and subtitle, the river has to be named. (2) Further definition is needed—where and how long? (3) Alliterative summation of sensory phenomena and immediate mood of the book. Note that the descriptive words on content come before the identification of the place—despite the questions raised in the title: What river? Where? (4) Supportive detail completes the picture.

Names useful:

The Lion's Paw
by D. R. Sherman

Annotation: A young bushman in the Kalahari Desert befriends a trapped lion and is caught in a

Comment: The exact place is not absolutely necessary; Africa is clearly suggested by the rest of the content. But the unusual nature of the setting and the sound of the word “Kalahari” add mystery and interest. Don't forget sound.

Names should only be used when they add information to the bibliographic material—but not when they repeat it, when the sound adds flavor, or when the book is one of a series and the character is an identifying and selling point. Too many names confuse rather than clarify, and can lead to ambiguous pronouns.

Names add to bibliographic materials:

Chancy
by Louis L'Amour

Annotation: Young drifter ⁽¹⁾Otis Chancy takes his ⁽²⁾chances against crooked sheriffs, deadly gunmen, and renegade Indians. . . .

Comment: (1) Shows that the title is the name of the hero. (2) A small play on words that should not be overdone.

Exile of the Stars
by Andre Norton

Annotation: *Krip Vorland* and *Maelen* of the free trader ship *Lydis* are forced to land with a priceless treasure on the supposedly uninhabited planet of *Sekhmet*...

Comment: The unusual names enhance the exotic nature of the subject.

Names identify:

Sleeping Murder
by Agatha Christie

Annotation: In this, her last case, *Miss Marple* warns a charming young couple ...

Comment: Fans will want to know which of Agatha Christie's famous sleuths is featured.

Rebecca West: A Celebration
by Rebecca West

Annotation: Selections from the works of Dame *Rebecca West* ...

Comment: The author's name has to appear twice in the bibliographic material; a third appearance in the annotation is boring.

Character names should not be used if they are common. A descriptive phrase would have the advantage of telling something about the person that relates to development of the plot (New York detective, gun-shy cowboy, heiress to coal-baron's fortune).

Sometimes character names are a necessity. If the annotation would otherwise dissolve into mysterious pronouns and obscure references, use names—interesting or not—for comprehension.

Adjectives

Adjectives describe nouns and are next in importance to nouns and verbs. Their purpose is to refine definition, infuse color, and add dimension to a noun.

Some nouns with carefully selected adjectives can almost tell the story:

lonely, mute boy ... homeless,

intelligent mongrel
seasoned detective ... strange
rituals ... sinister cult.

Set or sum up the tone

Annotation: Begins with an *aged and weary* King Arthur ... (Opening phrase about *The Book of Merlyn*, by T. H. White, a sequel to *The Once and Future King*)

familiar with the youthful apprehensions that opened the earlier book, they provide a striking comparison.

Annotation: The plot revolves around *flamboyant* Richard Coeur de Lion and his *exquisite* queen.

(Summing up *The Passionate Brood*, by Margaret Campbell, a historical novel about the Crusades and the early Plantagenet kings of England.)

Comment: “Flamboyant” is appropriate to Richard’s activities and style; “exquisite” denotes someone dainty, and provides contrast. Note how flat the sentence would be without the adjectives.

Add color

April Lady

by Georgette Heyer

Annotation: Light novel set in Regency England. To help such ⁽¹⁾*déserving* people as ⁽³⁾*her dashing*, ⁽²⁾*debt-ridden brother* and ⁽³⁾*her husband’s lovesick young sister*, Lady Helen continually tells little white lies. One fib too many puts her marriage in jeopardy.

Specifics: (1) “Deserving people” sets up an image
(2) Immediately counteracted by “dashing, debt-ridden brother” and

scoring the irony of the first adjective.

(3) Simple words give definition and hint at something about the plot—one of these relatives is hers and one is his.

Should not judge

Adjectives should not be used to make explicit judgments about books. What reviewers or annotation writers find “lively” may be deadly to readers. Reaction to a book depends on interest in the subject, background brought to it, and mood of the moment. These factors cannot be assessed for readers.

Avoid:

pleasant introduction to ...

sensitive novel about ...

colorful account ...

powerful collection ...

enthusiastic, lively, reverent

account ...

sympathetic tale about ...

unique, interesting commentary ...

a touching, funny novel ...

perceptive insights into ... (redundant as well as judgmental)

warm, sympathetic story ...

engaging account ...

charming portrait ...

fascinating stories of ...

moving and lucid biography ...

Small words

Little words mean a lot! But in the struggle to get words right—interesting nouns, active verbs, precise and colorful adjectives—articles and words that connect or introduce phrases can get insufficient attention.

Articles

English utilizes three articles. “A” and “an” are indefinite; “the” is definite. “Indefinite” and “definite” are not just grammar-book names; they point out a function. “A” and “an” indicate that the subject is one of a group—any one. Often such a relationship is understood and the article is unnecessary. “The” shows uniqueness—that particular one, or totality—all of them. Articles are not interchangeable, and they are overused.

Example: ... describes *the* adjustments made by plant and animal species to perpetuate themselves in their inhospitable environment (from a nonfiction work about deserts, but it could apply to any place where plants or animals are in trouble).

Comment: *The* adjustments implies that every possibility is

covered, an unlikely circumstance in any scientific field. The force of the annotation is not diminished if the article is omitted; the content is suspect if it is included.

Conjunctions

These connecting words make clear a relationship. “And” indicates that elements go together, “or” shows choice, “but” introduces an exception or condition. “And/or” has crept into use, but not into the dictionary; options that are compatible at some point and divergent at others can be expressed differently and better.

Prepositions

These words lead to qualifying phrases. Many prepositions are visually short, only two letters (*to*, *by*), and simple in sound, only one or two syllables (*through*, *below*). Although these small and familiar words are not interchangeable, several of them can be used in somewhat the same sense. “Of,” the most common preposition, has twelve major definitions—with up to four submeanings under these headings—in *Webster's New Col-*

An annotation that used “of” for all, or even a large fraction, of its possible meanings would be infinitely monotonous. Strive for variety and the most precise meaning. Avoid overuse, which leads to long, rambling sentences.

Because of the tendency to equate “preposition” with “short,” writers tend to get edgy and wonder if they’re being pedantic when considering prepositions longer than five letters. Actually, English utilizes many prepositions, not all of them short, and many longer ones are in common usage and not at all obscure in meaning.

A list for selection

about	across
above	after
according to	against

among	on
apart from	onto
around	out
at	out of
because of	outside
before	over
behind	past
below	since
beneath	through
beside	throughout
between	to
beyond	toward
by	under
concerning	underneath
during	until
except	unto
for	up
from	upon
in	with
inside	within
instead of	without
into	

Language traps

Be careful about

- any word that has more than one meaning. “Since” means both “because of” and “from the time of”; examples are legion. Substitute another word or construction unless the meaning is unmistakable.
- words that can be used as more than one part of speech. That description applies to many words and writers cannot, and should not, avoid them all. For instance,

these words have different pronunciations:

read (present and past tense of the same verb)

project (noun and verb)

separate (adjective and verb)

record (noun and verb)

These common words have the same pronunciation:

gain (noun and verb)

mandate (noun and verb)

light (noun, adjective, and verb)
like (verb, noun, adjective, preposition, adverb)

Obviously, such words cannot be prohibited for annotations, but the context must make the meaning clear. A negative example:

Can You Trust Your Bank?

by Robert Heller and
Morris Willatt

Annotation: A study of the *world's banks documents* what went wrong . . .

Problem: “Documents” is intended as a verb (*a study . . . documents*), but the statement has to be read several times and the punctuation examined carefully before that is clear. The reader’s tendency is to consider “documents” as a collection of official-looking papers. Reading the phrase would try the most professional and dedicated narrator.

Avoid

- redundancies. “Dead corpse” is overdoing it. A corpse or a body found someplace is assumed to be dead; it’s inherent in the noun. Case histories are assumed to be “actual”; if they are fictionalized, that needs to be stated.
- clichés. Some words have been used together so often that they no

longer have any meaning. All “ends” are not “bitter,” “apologies” can be something other than “object,” and not all horses have to be “dark.” Such phrases are sometimes appropriate for a formula-written book that is in itself a cliché; they have no place in the description of a classic (either established or potential).

- obscure words. The purpose is communication. Scouring the dictionary, thesaurus, encyclopedia, and other references is good practice for writers; these sources may lead to the exact word for the concept to be expressed. Using unfamiliar words in the annotation, however, is bad practice. Readers need to understand what is being communicated.

- literary allusions. Writers can’t assume that readers know other books or references; there should be some explanatory phrases.

Never

- stereotype people or groups of people. Beware of “isms” about
- age
 - ethnic origin
 - handicaps
 - occupation
 - race
 - religion
 - sex.

The intent is simple: treat people/characters/authors as individuals, not as products and examples of some group background. The complexity—and it's very real—is in developing an understanding of what is collective and what is individual, what is helpful and what is offensive. Volumes have been written on specifics.

In general

- Describe race, religion, or ethnic origin of authors or characters only if that information is germane to the content of the book.
- Be careful that descriptive

adjectives are not drawn to indicate that some groups of people are more worthwhile than others.

- Don't stress occupation and achievement for men, and youth and beauty for women.
- Depict handicapped people realistically.

The annotation cannot avoid stereotypes if they are inherent in the book; annotation writers are not responsible for the attitudes of authors. Make sure, however, that the book is described accurately; don't promote prejudices unnecessarily.

Write

Finally it's time to turn all that preparation into an annotation. Using the preliminary notes—

- choose a writing style to fit the book
- determine an appropriate length
- get to the point
- vary sentence structure
- be specific and concise
- watch grammar and punctuation
- adhere to style.

Choose a writing style to fit the book

Consider and convey the author's intent and the mood of the book. A serious study should not sound like a light novel; a light novel should not sound like a philosophical treatise. The tone should enhance the description.

The Hawkline Monster: A Gothic Western
by Richard Brautigan

Annotation: Romp through a surrealistic world. A young Indian girl wanders into the wrong

brothel looking for the right man to kill the monster that lives in the ice caves under the basement of an old house.

Comment: The annotation is almost as surrealistic as the world of the novel. All those phrases would be too much for most books; they are right for this one.

The Human Pedigree

by Anthony Smith

Annotation: A British science reporter confronts the complex

medical, legal, and political problems of genetic engineering. Considers such moral questions as whether people with defective genes should marry and whether seriously defective infants should live.

Comment: Straightforward treatment of a difficult subject with many ramifications. The author's background is given immediately and "confronts" is an excellent choice for the main verb.

Determine an appropriate length

Length is dependent on space requirements. About fifty words is a safe limit for book cards and selection cards; if there is a long subtitle, the annotation will have to be proportionately shorter. Since subtitles usually contain information that would otherwise be included in the annotation, there should be no loss to the

reader.

Within this limit, length is determined by content. Some books can be described with great accuracy in one short, direct statement. Children's books and how-to books often need only a few carefully chosen words. More complex material, fiction and nonfiction, needs fuller description.

Get to the point

A strong characterizing first sentence sums up the main emphasis of the book. Supportive details follow.

Edward VIII

by Frances Donaldson

Annotation: Lady Donaldson

suggests that Edward VIII's abdication to marry Mrs. Simpson was a willful abandonment of the throne rather than a noble sacrifice. The eldest son of King George V is portrayed as a tragic personality, the victim of his own flawed character and judgment.

Comment: The opening sentence

presents the author's thesis. The second develops it.

Dhalgren

by Samuel R. Delany

Annotation: As the sun grows deadly, the world goes mad. Society perishes, savagery rules, and all that was known is over. In these dying days of Earth, a young drifter enters the city. Explicit descriptions of sex, strong language, and violence.

Comment: The opening sentence presents the situation and sets the mood. The second adds details, opposing the concepts of "society" and "savagery." The concluding sentence inserts a person into the setting, implying that something is about to happen and enticing the reader to find out what that is. The warning phrases indicate that the action may not be to everyone's taste.

An overcrowded first sentence cannot focus the readers' attention on any one point and they may lose interest.

The Terrible Teague Bunch

by Gary Jennings

Annotation: ⁽¹⁾*Comic western* ⁽²⁾*set*
in Texas ⁽³⁾*at the turn-of-the-*

century in which ⁽⁴⁾*four well-*
intentioned badmen ⁽⁵⁾*encounter*
⁽⁶⁾*rough obstacles* and ⁽⁷⁾*tough luck*
⁽⁸⁾*enroute* ⁽⁹⁾*to robbing a train*
⁽¹⁰⁾*carrying money* ⁽¹¹⁾*to a new bank*
⁽¹²⁾*at Teague.*

Comment: Twelve separate thoughts are stuffed into one sentence. Run-on thoughts are a challenge even to the inveterate reader of westerns.

Avoid wordy opening phrases. It's superfluous to start with "a book about . . . "; the reader knows that it is a book about something. Moreover, such an opening phrase almost insists that the writer add descriptive adjectives about the book, and these can too easily become judgmental.

Wordy: *Warm, sympathetic story of the seven restless and ambitious children of a pre-depression Jewish immigrant family as they pursue power and wealth. . . .*

Direct: *Seven restless and ambitious children of a pre-depression Jewish family pursue power and wealth. . . .*

Beware of

The story of . . .

Here is a story of . . .

This is a horror story about . . .

This novel chronicles . . .

*This little book is made up of ...
Here in his own words is a story
of ...*

Author's account of ...

This novel concerns ...

*An intriguing novel in which ...
(also a value judgment)*

*A touching, funny novel ... (two
value judgments)*

*Gothic/historical/science-fiction/
western/contemporary/mystery/
suspense novel that ...*

The annotation usually should
start with the information that

comes after such phrases. Spell
out the genre only if there is
likely to be doubt. The annota-
tion's tone and content are the
best means for conveying the type
of book. The reader can tell
that it's a historical novel if
the time period and setting are
given; that it's a gothic novel
if the heroine is being pursued
around a spooky mansion on the
edge of a cliff overlooking the
moors.

Vary sentence structure

Variety makes for interesting
reading and listening. Short
sentences should be mingled with
longer ones. Sentence fragments
are acceptable if the meaning is
clear. Questions, exclamations, and
quotations can add interest, but
such devices should not be over-
worked.

Good: A cat is kidnapped because
he is the cherished stablemate of a
thoroughbred race horse who
performs well only when the cat
is around. The catnap job is
assigned to Bertie!

Will easy-riding cowboy Hewey
Calloway finally settle down? He
realizes that a new era is coming

century, but doesn't want to
change with it.

Shakespeare's best-known plays
are presented in a new, humorous
light, "the old light having blown
a fuse."

Overcomplex sentences

Avoid overlong and overcomplex
sentences. They make the reader
search for the meaning and can
pave the way for grammatical
errors.

Unacceptable: Former Scotland
Yard detective John Raven be-
comes involved with a Polish
con man *whom he* knew years
before to help denounce a fellow
Pole *whom he* suspects of spying

Comment: Who did what to whom?

Parallel construction

Keep parallel thoughts parallel in construction. Use a verb throughout or omit throughout. Use the same tense and approximately the same length for each thought.

Be specific and concise

Language should create a precise image. Sentences should flow smoothly from one thought to another and should not encompass too many separate thoughts. Avoid overuse of prepositional phrases, choppy sentences with too many discreet parts, and wordiness.

Imprecise language

Annotation: Excerpts from *various* sources that present the author's provocative opinions and insights on literature, feminism, her family, and *various* contemporary figures.

Comment: Two vague, "various" things. If it is important to mention sources at all, they need more definition. The second "various" is unnecessary and weakens an otherwise good listing of content; readers would no more expect opinions on all contemporary figures than they would on all literature. Most of the time, "various" can be left out with no meaning lost.

Good: The junior senator from New York, elected on the Conservation Party ticket, presents his political views. He analyzes the Constitution, advocates less centralized government, observes the loss of American productivity, and comments on the dangers of isolation. 1975.

ous" can be left out with no meaning lost.

Too many prepositional phrases

Annotation: Novel about one year *in* the lives *of* four women *in* their late thirties *in* the glamorous city *of* New York. . .

Comment: Three "ins," two "ofs," one after the other. And the sentence goes on from there.

Annotation: Former *Washington Post* White House correspondent chronicles the paper's centennial *from* its founding *by* Democrat Stilson Hutchins *from* New Hampshire *in* 1877 *to* the exciting days *of* the Watergate expose.

Annotation: Novel examines the lives *of* Beverly and her friends, two wealthy sisters *from* a prominent family, *from* young womanhood *in* the mid-1940s *to* the

fornia *through* the turbulent present. . . .

Comment: There are six prepositional phrases in each annotation. Consider whether all this information needs to be included. See if another construction can be used.

Some wordiness can be avoided by substituting adjectives for prepositional phrases:

“Australian kangaroo species” for *species of kangaroo in Australia*

“New Orleans street” for *street in New Orleans*

“social evils” for *evils of society*.

This technique can become as monotonous as the prepositional phrases and should not be used all the time, but it does make writing more concise. *A judicious mixture of prepositions and adjectives is the best answer.*

Choppy sentences

Annotation: In Florida, in 1941, irrepressible, redhaired, six-year-old Terrell son of Gerald, the harried manager of a farm-worker’s camp, and his expectant wife Mickey, continually plays hooky from school.

Comment: Too many thought units broken up by too many commas. Some of the information may be unnecessary; some could be combined (*Florida farm-worker’s camp*). Readers should

not have to work to determine who and what the book is about.

Wordiness

Wordiness takes many forms. The examples given for overuse of prepositional phrases and choppy sentences are types of wordiness that result from overcrowding sentences. An opposite phenomenon can occur.

Annotation: The authors trace 100 years of American technology from the innovative plumbers of the 1770s to the inventions of Bell and Edison. Through the use of minibiographies, the (authors) produce a highly readable study of the early years of American technology.

Comment: Too many words for the amount of information. The facts presented are: (1) 100 years of technology, (2) from the 1770s to Bell and Edison, (3) through the use of minibiographies. “A highly readable study” is opinion. The annotation is circular; it starts with American technology and ends with American technology. Space and words could be used to better advantage. Do the authors have a point to make?

The simplest and most obvious form of wordiness consists of using words and phrases that could be eliminated or made more specific

without changing the meaning or the impact.

Wordy: *one of the most distinguished of the Latin fathers*
Concise: a distinguished churchman

Wordy: *shortcuts and guidelines, including specific details*
Concise: tips

Wordy: *Considered to be the most famous biography in the English language, this is an intimate . . .*
Concise: Famous biography gives an intimate . . .

Wordy: *information in the area of . . .*
Concise: information about/on

Watch grammar and punctuation

Grammar

These technical matters are aids to comprehension, and carelessness can change or obscure meaning.

Subjects and verbs should agree. Lack of agreement most often occurs with collective nouns (a family *does* something but its members *do* something) or with compound subjects separated by descriptive clauses or phrases. Lack of agreement often creeps in when the subject and verb are separated by long, parenthetical information. Keep the construction simple.

Annotation: *Recollections* of the four Carter children growing up, and their relationship with each other, *provides* insight into the mercurial personality of Billy
Problem: “Recollections” is plural; “provides” is singular. Thirteen words come between the subject

and the verb and contribute to the creation of an error.

References should be clear. Watch those pronouns and modifiers.

Annotation: When a stranger offers young Willie Banks a ride and asks him to deliver a package, *he* is unaware that *he* is about to become . . .
Problem: Which “he?” Willie or the stranger? Both, separately? There are four possible readings.

Annotation: Joining two friends for a flight from San Francisco to Death Valley, the pilot chooses the wrong pass, forcing the plane into the mountainside and killing the author’s two friends.
Problem: If all three people are

friends, the sentence is correct technically; the pilot joined two friends and the author's two friends were killed. But the pilot and the author are two different people; the pilot did not survive. That's almost impossible to determine from the sentence.

Participles and phrases should not dangle; they should have something to modify.

Annotation: *Written in 1962*, the former President . . .

Problem: The former President wasn't written in 1962, the book was.

Annotation: *The recipient of many awards including the Pulitzer Prize*, her poems . . .

Problem: The dangling modifier fails to make a subtle distinction; the poem doesn't receive the prize, the poet does.

Punctuation

Use proper and adequate punctuation. These small marks help to group thoughts that belong together and separate those that need to be isolated. Collecting and separating thought units helps the person who reads the written annotation and the narrator who presents the oral one.

Some punctuation is optional. The Chicago style manual says that, aside from the few obligatory uses, use of the comma "is mainly a matter of good judgment, with ease of reading as the end in view" (section 5.23). The statement doesn't mean commas can be used at random; it recommends judgment.

Don't let words and thoughts run together; use more punctuation rather than less when there is an option. Use dashes to set aside thoughts when too many commas become confusing. Divide long sentences into separate thought segments with periods, question marks, and exclamation points. Ease of reading is the criterion.

Adhere to style

"Style" in this context means the treatment of punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and numbers that have various acceptable forms. For consistency, one form is selected

and used throughout. NLS uses *A Manual of Style*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969) as the basic reference.

The most commonly needed

information is: (numbers refer to the appropriate sections of the Chicago manual)

- Commas are used with three or more words in series—5.46
- Prepositions in titles are lower case regardless of length—7.123
- Main titles and subtitles are separated by a colon—7.126
- Compound adjectives should be hyphenated before nouns (*vine-covered cottage*)—6.17
- No apostrophes in years (*1940s*, not *1940's*)—6.5
- No periods in abbreviations for agencies and organizations (*NLS*, *UNESCO*)—14.15
- Numbers under 100 are written out and lower case; includes ages

(*ten year old*, *sixteen-year-old son*)—8.2

- Centuries and decades are written out and lower case (*twentieth century*, *eighteenth-century novel*, *in the thirties*)—8.15
- Figures are used with percent (*in 90 percent of . . .*)—8.9
- Titles are lower case unless used as part of name, abbreviated if used with full name, written out if with last name only (*the president*, *President Kennedy*, *Pres. John F. Kennedy*)—7.17, 7.18, 14.5

Note: Occupations are not titles. (*New York detective*, *detective Nero Wolfe*.) But *Detective Sergeant Jones*; a rank is a title.

Editing an
Annotation

Why edit?

Editing reverses the writing procedure: the writer is going from the book to the annotation; the editor is going from the annotation to the book. The editor can look at the announcement as the reader would—without necessarily any prior knowledge of the book—and consider what it tells.

Editing does not automatically imply changes; the review may show that the copy can stand as written. It may show quite the opposite: that a complete revision/rewrite is needed. Most annotations will fall somewhere in between, with some changes needed. From an editing point of view, annotations fall into four categories:

- no editing or minimal changes needed
- some editing needed for grammar or construction
- multiple errors that may require rewriting
- serious content problems that may require rethinking.

Editing should be done with the book and the source material available so that content can be verified.

Put down the pencil. Like writers, editors have to take time to think. Read the announcement as a totality: bibliographic information, description, and additional information.

Then consider:

- is it stylistically correct?
- is it judgmental?
- is it grammatical?
- is it interesting?
- does the annotation describe the book?
- are the facts accurate?

Questions are arranged, not in order of importance, but according to usual editorial procedure. Errors in style hit the eye first; determining accuracy of content requires research. What starts out as a simple language change can disclose other problems. All questions have to be handled, but they cannot always be considered in order.

Is the style correct?

The most common mistakes will be corrected easily and, since they are common, almost automatically by the editor. See the section on style, pp. 34 and 35, for a list of common errors and the proper style.

For less frequent and more complicated situations, the editor should have two references readily

available, *A Manual of Style* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969) and *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: G.&C. Merriam Co., 1976). If a more complete dictionary is needed to locate a word, that word is probably too obscure to present to readers, most of whom do not have access to a dictionary.

Is it judgmental?

Most judgments occur in adjectives describing the book: "exciting," "poignant," "easily read and interesting" (see list on pp. 23 and 24). Some judgments are even more overt: "a joyful collection," "a

useful and entertaining work," "a highly readable book," "an essay of wide-ranging importance." *Editors must eliminate words and phrases that tell readers what they will think about a book.*

Endorsement of books or authors

More serious are characterizations about authors or style of writing that state directly or imply that the Library of Congress endorses some books or authors.

A Fine and Pleasant Misery
by Patrick F. McManus

Annotation: Twenty-seven ⁽¹⁾*mirth-provoking*, ⁽²⁾*cautionary* camping reminiscences that originally appeared in *Field and Stream*. Considered by critics as ⁽³⁾*one of the funniest contemporary humorists*,

McManus's *droll* style is a ⁽⁵⁾*side-splitting* experience.

Problems: (1) Judgmental; assumes the reader's reaction.

(2) Possibly misleading; the cautions are intended to be funny, not to give directions.

(3) Is there a consensus and a ranking? The clause adds nothing about the book and its accuracy is hard to determine; one or two favorable reviews do not justify such a sweeping statement.

(4) "Droll" is a descriptive adjective meaning that the author

wanted to provoke laughter. It's useful to know the author's intentions; no problem here.

(5) The writer liked the book, but that doesn't count. It's judgmental to say the author succeeded in his intention to be funny; that's up to the reader to decide.

Comment: Overall, the annotation says a lot about what other people think. The only information on content is that the book is about camping reminiscences. There should be more feeling for the content, not merely commentary on it. The language can show

that the book is funny without saying it.

Procedure: Skim the chapter titles for incidents to illustrate the type of humor. Skim the selected chapters to verify that the titles reflect the contents.

Edited/rewritten: Twenty-seven droll sketches that originally appeared in *Field and Stream*. Dealing primarily with camping reminiscences, they poke fun at the author's experiences with an inept hunting dog, intruding cows, ne'er-do-well companions, and a national park.

Controversial subjects

More dangerous is taking a position on controversial subjects. Proponents of opposing positions could rightfully expect equal space and support.

Origins

by Richard E. Leakey and Roger Lewin

Annotation: ⁽¹⁾ *This book has been described as the best work on man's origins and development.* The authors explain the emergence of man out of Africa and into modern life. ⁽²⁾ *Some new approaches* ⁽³⁾ *to controversial topics* are discussed, such as the growth of intelligence, the nature of man, and the names of species. This

popularly written book is a Bestseller, 1977.

Problems: (1) The statement, which could reflect a single reviewer's opinion, seems to be a strong endorsement of the book. (2) What new approaches? The premise and conclusion are missing. The controversy is about cooperation vs. aggression; the areas listed are details of that. (3) The NLS collection contains recent books by prominent anthropologists who take an opposing position. If the subject is controversial, the Library of Congress can't appear to promote one point of view.

Procedure: Check the reviews and

book jacket to find the controversial premise and conclusion. ° Verify information in the table of contents and text.

Rewritten: Explains the emergence of man out of Africa and into modern life. Some controversial

topics are discussed, such as the growth of intelligence, the nature of man, and the names of species. The authors consider cooperation and social organization more significant in human development than aggression. Bestseller 1977.

The author's opinion

Most dangerous of all is expressing the author's opinion as that of the Library of Congress. Be sure that the annotation explains that the thesis is the author's.

The Zapping of America
by Paul Brodeur

Annotation: ⁽¹⁾*The dangers of microwave radiation have been covered up by numerous government agencies. The author exposes the inherent dangers of microwaves.* His examples range from the ⁽³⁾*seemingly benign* microwave oven to the ⁽⁴⁾*well-publicized intentional* irradiation of embassy officials in Moscow.

Problems: (1) That's a rather sweeping statement for a government agency to make about other government agencies!

(2) Wrong placement in the annotation; should come first as the main emphasis.

(3) Questionable modifier; "benign" means "harmless" only in medical parlance. Its more common definitions include "of

gentle disposition," "gracious," and "kindly"—terms more appropriate to people than objects.

(4) Modifier that time may erase. The publicity occurred previous to the writing of the book and long before the book was published. By the time the book is recorded, distributed to network libraries, and available to readers, the publicity may long be forgotten.

(5) Modifier that must be considered for accuracy; "intention" is unproved at the time of writing. However, the assumption is the author's and listed as his example. To remove it would not reflect the content of the book.

Procedure: Reorder, assign the premise to the author, and delete the questionable adjectives.

Edited: Exposes the inherent dangers of microwaves. The author claims that the dangers of microwave radiation have been covered up by numerous government agencies. His examples range from the household microwave oven to the intentional irradiation of embassy officials in Moscow.

Is it grammatical?

Subject and verb agreement

Grammatical mistakes may be simple to correct: locate the subject and verb and bring them into agreement. Sentences may require some rearranging or rewriting if the subject and verb are too far apart and difficult to locate, even if they do agree.

Annotation: Lively *stories* of the names of some of the most familiar stars, planets, and constellations *include* what ancient people believed about them and what scientists know today.

Problem: All those words between the subject and the verb (which do agree), including three *of* phrases.

Procedure: Divide into two parts, give the first its own verb, and delete the wordiness.

Edited: Stories explain the names of familiar stars, planets, and constellations. Covers ...

Misplaced modifiers

Misplaced modifiers are so far from the words they describe that readers cannot be sure which words are described. The meaning of misplaced modifiers must be clarified. They usually have to be moved to their correct location, and the sentence may have to

be repunctuated, rewritten, or divided.

Example: Like the saint, Margarita becomes a familiar figure in the Bay area *serving the outcasts*.

Problem: “Serving the outcasts” modifies “figure,” not “area.”

Correction: Move the phrase to follow “figure.”

Dangling participles

Dangling participles always require rewriting to clarify. They are often coupled with other language or content problems.

Example: ⁽¹⁾*Meeting in 1946* when Ivinskaya was a ⁽²⁾*beautiful young* editor, ⁽³⁾*this is an account of* their love for each other. . . . (He’s Russian author Boris Pasternak.)

Problems: (1) The phrase is dangling rather than misplaced because it doesn’t modify any of the subsequent words. It also doesn’t indicate the duration of their relationship, which has a bearing on her credentials for writing this book.

(2) This description can cover a twenty-year span. She was in her mid-thirties; hardly elderly, but the meaning would be different for a gothic novel.

(3) Wordy within the annotation as well as at the beginning.

Procedure: Could be made grammatical by replacing “meeting” with “they met” and dividing into two sentences. That correction would not solve the content problems. Needs research and rewriting.

Rewritten: This love story covers the last fourteen years of his life, which Ivinskaya shared, and . . .

Ambiguous pronouns

Other grammatical mistakes may also take research to correct. Ambiguous pronouns require discovering which person is meant. Reviews or the book jacket may clarify the reference; some reading may be necessary.

Example: Traces the lives of frontiersman Matthew Howard, a follower of Jefferson and *his* aristocratic wife. . . .

Problem: Grammatically, the wife referred to must be Jefferson’s, since he is the nearest reference. But “lives” is plural and there is no other person indicated.

Procedure: Insert a comma after Jefferson. Mrs. Howard was the

person being discussed.

Parallel structure

Lack of parallel structure can cause the same difficulty, especially if one section contains a vague phrase. Finding more precise language requires more knowledge of the book.

Example: Relates the story of Sir John Ollenshaw’s crippled son Philip, who grew up in hatred and neglect, left England for America, and *what he accomplished there*.

Problems: Needs a verb form to be parallel. What did he accomplish? Also, some wordiness could be eliminated and the tense made more immediate. The protagonist’s name is probably useful as a balance to his father’s.

Procedure: Check the book for an accomplishment.

Rewritten: Sir John Ollenshaw’s crippled son Philip grows up in hatred and neglect, leaves England for America, and learns to survive in the wilderness.

Is it interesting?

A good annotation won’t get people to select books on subjects they don’t care about, but a dull or

vague annotation might cause them to ignore books they would enjoy or find useful.

- Does the annotation contain information that achieves the purpose?
- Does it leave something to the reader by not giving away the whole plot?
- Is it concise and easy to follow?
- Does it use clear and descriptive language?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, the editor will have to study the annotation to isolate problems. Editors must consider facts chosen for inclusion, structure and balance of their pre-

sentation, and language used to express them. These interwoven factors have to be separated for editorial consideration. It may be necessary to number ideas or slash sentences into thought segments before the reasons for the difficulties emerge.

Language may have to be rearranged, more precise and descriptive words added or substituted, wordiness eliminated. Some facts may have to be added for balance and some deleted for conciseness.

Are appropriate facts chosen?

Marina and Lee

by Priscilla Johnson McMillan

Annotation: ⁽¹⁾ *A former member of Sen. John F. Kennedy's staff, later a Moscow-based reporter who interviewed Lee Harvey Oswald, ⁽²⁾ tells the intimate details of his marriage to a Russian and his personal life. A ⁽³⁾sympathetic portrait of this ⁽⁴⁾unlikely couple's life together in Russia and America and ⁽⁵⁾a discussion of Oswald's motive for assassinating Kennedy. 1977.*

Problems: (1) The book-jacket material on the author and several reviews of the book confirm both of these connections; they probably explain the author's interest in the

subject. The reader would conclude that the material came from these sources. Actually, most of the material included in the book came from research and from Mrs. Oswald, who is not mentioned as a source. Also, the background of the author has a more prominent position than the subject of the book.

(2) Wrong order; his personal life should come first and then his marriage which was eventually a part of it.

(3) "Sympathetic" and "unlikely" are both judgment words. Does "sympathetic" mean that the author thinks Oswald was right in what he did? What was "unlikely" about the marriage?

(4) This statement could be more intriguing; what motive?

Rewritten: Portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald's personal life and the intimate details of his marriage. Written with his Russian-born

widow's cooperation, this study depicts the couple's life together in Russia and America and theorizes that Oswald's motives for assassinating Kennedy were both political and personal. 1977.

Does the annotation leave something for the reader?

All the Rivers Run

by Nancy Cato

Annotation: Orphaned in a shipwreck and cut off from her native England, twelve-year-old Delie begins a new life in the gold-mining town of Kiandra in Australia. Raised by relatives in the outback country, she becomes a lovely young woman, leaves home to study art, and marries a riverboat captain.

Comment: The first sentence sets the scene well, except for some preposition problems at the end. The second sentence gives a rather flat outline of the plot, with the implication that the heroine married and "they lived happily ever after." There is little to entice the reader's imagination.

Actually, much of the action takes place after the marriage; there was no proverbial happy ending at that point. Some small editorial changes could remove the wrong impression and throw the focus on the background, where it belongs for this novel. Discovering what happens in the heroine's life would depend on reading the book—the reader's choice.

Rewritten: Orphaned in a shipwreck and shut off from her native England, twelve-year-old Delie begins a new life in Kiandra, an Australian gold-mining town. The saga of her life is set in the outback country where she is raised, in the cities where she studies art, and on the riverboat where she raises her own family.

Is the annotation concise and easy to follow?

Example: With the mistakenly convicted young murderer of his wife Nina about to be executed, Steve's asthmatic six-year-old son who witnessed his mother's murder

is kidnapped—possibly by the real murderer. . . .

Comment: The sentence ends well, but there is too much information preceding the final phrase. The

wife's name adds little and decisions have to be made about which facts to relay about the son. If the person was convicted erroneously, he's not a murderer; all those words include one that's wrong. Also, there is some doubt about whose wife was murdered; "his" could refer to either man. Such

mistakes are easier to make when too much information is being handled as a unit.

Edited: As the young man mistakenly convicted of murdering Steve's wife is about to be executed, Steve's asthmatic six-year-old son is kidnapped—possibly by the real murderer.

Is the language clear and descriptive?

Many problems are caused by choice of words: misused words, unnecessary words, too few words, words that could be better selected, words that would be better placed, words that should never be used.

Misused words

Annotation: Account of the author's *bout* with rheumatoid arthritis from the age of twenty-five and her determination not to be thought of, and treated as, a cripple. . . .

Comment: "Bout" is generally used for a short-term, one-time conflict. It's inappropriate for the description of a life-time struggle.

Annotation: *Personalized* overview of Tito's swiftly changing land by a former Yugoslav. . . .

Comment: "Personalized" means made for someone (stationery, T-shirts). The point of view was taken by someone and was from a

personal perspective.

Annotation: A *most unique* presentation . . .

Comment: "Unique" means singular, without equal. A one-of-a-kind thing cannot be more or less so. *Unique* cannot be compared; delete *most*.

Annotation: The mythology of cleanliness moving up next to godliness is the prime tenet of (the author's) *thesis*, and he *debunks* it well.

Comment: "Thesis" is an argument presented and supported; "debunks" means "exposes sham pretensions." The two words are contradictory and one must be misused. The editor must determine whether cleanliness is a tenet or a target.

Unnecessary words

Example: *There is* a final section *which also* discusses his conclusions.

Procedure: Edit to “The final section discusses his conclusions.”

Eliminate the statement entirely if there is enough background material, or if the book is available to find out what the conclusions are. Substitute a sentence summarizing the conclusions.

Examples:

The adventures of ... who ...

A collection of ... which ...

Procedure: Such phrases should be eliminated and the subject approached directly. The information needed is the content indicated by the ellipses.

Words that could be better selected

Most aspects of language could be considered under this heading. In general, the editor should see if the wording could be tightened, if additions would add definition or interest, or if substitutions are needed.

Tightening: *Shows how false the common view is ...*

Shows common misconceptions ...

Adding definition: ... *sending towns backward and forward in time*

... sending towns backward into prehistoric settlements and forward into futuristic cities

Adding interest: *In London*

William Helder ... meets the beautiful Hazel Paget ...

A rich London bachelor ... meets an attractive Cambridgeshire secretary ... (descriptions indicate more about the plot than names)

Words that could be better placed

The Book of Sand

by Jorge Luis Borges

Annotation: An assortment of thirteen short stories from the distinguished blind Argentinean poet that contains *fable, philosophy, and autobiography*.

Edited: Fable, philosophy, and autobiography in thirteen short stories from the distinguished blind Argentinian poet. (Description of content is more interesting than labeling the book as an assortment; it should be first instead of last.)

Words that should not be used

Example: Tells of the *hopes* and understanding needed for dealing with a *hopelessly* retarded child....

Edited: ... severely retarded child. (The book explains that the parents haven't given up hope. Putting

“hopes” and “hopelessly” in the same sentence needlessly emphasizes the difficulty. Watch for sensitive words.)

Example: The author *attempts to* explain . . .

Edited: The author explains/theorizes/claims/shows . . . “Attempts to” implies a lack of success, a judgment better left to the reader.

Freudian traps

Also look at whether the annotation has any hidden Freudian traps, situations where the writer intended one reading and the reader may find quite another. Grammatical errors can often lead to amusing interpretations, but none get quite as much reaction as those with sexual connotations. The annotation should not become, unintentionally, too interesting.

Every Other Man

by Mary Ann Bartusis, M.D.

Consider: Explores some of the deep-seated emotional conditions that cause men to be unfaithful and *gives specific details on handling many aspects of extra-marital affairs.*

Reconsider: Is the book a how-to manual for wandering husbands? The statement should be directed

to its proper audience.

Edited: . . . and gives women techniques for coping with many aspects of their husband’s extra-marital affairs.

All Things Wise and Wonderful

by James Herriot

Consider: Yorkshire veterinarian recalls his stint in the RAF during World War II and expresses his feeling about his new family and friends, *including his first child whom his wife delivered . . .*

Reconsider: Veterinarian or not, it’s unlikely that *he* had the child and *she* did the delivery.

Procedure: The easiest way is to delete. The sentence is already too long and too encompassing.

Lust for Life: The Novel of Vincent van Gogh

by Irving Stone

Consider: Fictionalized account of the Dutch painter follows his tortured life of unsuccessful love affairs and *endless striving for perfect techniques and accomplishment.* Some explicit description of sex.

Reconsider: The writer had in mind artistic technique and accomplishment. The title and the placement of the phrase might indicate that the subject is still sex.

Procedure: Make two sentences.

Does the annotation describe the book?

Read the annotation and consider the book the annotation describes. What can readers expect the book to be like?

Now go to the background material—reviews, the book cover, table of contents. Flip through the book and scan for tone and approach. *Is this the same book?* If not, editing is not sufficient; rewriting is needed.

The Ecstasy of Owen Muir
by Ring Lardner, Jr.

Annotation: Ironic novel of a young American and seeker of truth who is sent to prison for pacifism. Later he joins the army, is wounded, and discharged. He then launches himself in a business career, marries his secretary, and converts to her religion of Catholicism. Eventually they part and he joins a monastic order. Some strong language.

Problem: The annotation covers plot. The background material indicates that what happens isn't of primary importance: the point is

what the author thinks about situations described. Since the author is one of the creators of *M*A*S*H*, the background material is very likely to be correct. "Ironic novel" isn't strong enough or long enough to balance all that plot, but the annotation does have to show that the book is fiction.

Procedure: Skim random sections of the book to determine which approach is best.

Rewritten: Satiric novel about a young American truth-seeker who is sent to prison for pacifism.

Later episodes with the army, in a business career, and in a monastic order provide vehicles for slashing commentary on war, racism, big business, and organized religion.

Some strong language.

Also ask

- Is there enough information?
- Is the emphasis correct?
- Does the information lead to the proper conclusion?

All the factual material in an annotation can be correct and the reader can still be misled about the book's content.

Is there enough information?

Lion at Sea
by Max Hennessy

Annotation: The startlingly courageous adventures of Midshipman

Kelly Maguire of the Royal Navy at the outbreak of World War I. Assigned to patrol duty on an obsolete battle cruiser in the North Sea, he is captured by the Turks but escapes with the help of a sexy Arab princess.

Problem: The question is not hard to find: How did the Turks and the sexy Arab princess get to the North Sea? Either something is missing or more explanation is needed. Research shows that quite a lot is missing; the book covers

most of the major naval battles of the war. Annotations should cover the scope of the book, not just the initial situation.

Rewritten: The startlingly courageous adventures of Midshipman Kelly Maguire of the Royal Navy during World War I. He is assigned to patrol duty on an obsolete battle cruiser in the North Sea, captured by the Turks after Gallipoli, helped to escape by a sexy Arab princess, and involved in the Battle of Jutland.

Is the emphasis correct?

Education in the United States: An Interpretive History
by Robert L. Church and
Michael W. Sedlak

Annotation: A chronological social history of American educational ideas and institutions, from the Revolutionary War ⁽¹⁾to the present. A number of topics are discussed including the role of schools in American society, ⁽²⁾equality in education, the ⁽³⁾drive to preserve status quo in social inequality.

Problems: (1) Phrase indicating currentness of the book.

(2) The last two phrases seem contradictory. They do reflect the book's content, but tying them together in that form does not show how the authors approached the subjects. The contradiction needs to be emphasized, not ignored.

Edited: Chronological social history of American educational ideas and institutions, from the Revolution to the 1970s. Discussions cover the role of schools in American society. The goal of equality in education is contrasted with the tendency to preserve social inequality.

Is the reader led to the proper conclusion?

Waxwork
by Peter Lovesey

Annotation: In the 1880s, Detective Sgt. Cribb of Scotland Yard

methodically investigates the case of a proper Victorian lady who confesses to poisoning her photographer husband's assistant because she was being blackmailed. Upon close examination of her statement, *an impossible detail* reveals her confession to be false.

Problem: The background material says that “the impossible detail” is what got the detective interested and later mentions a surprise ending. Research shows that the detail was carefully contrived to negate the confession. She did it! The ending can't be revealed to readers, and they can't be given the impression that the false confession was the end of the matter. There are also some style, tense, and wordiness problems.

Rewritten: In the 1880s, Detective Sergeant Cribb of Scotland Yard methodically investigates the case of a proper Victorian lady who has admitted to poisoning her photographer husband's assistant. She's

about to be hanged—and her confession may be false!

Usually problems can be corrected in the same way they were for adding interest: by rearranging language or elements, inserting more precise and descriptive words, eliminating wordiness, adding or deleting facts to achieve conciseness and balance.

If the annotation is too far off the mark, it will have to be rewritten. There is no way to deal editorially with annotations that are all judgment and no content.

Annotation: This is one of the best stories that has been written by an American about a ballerina.

Problem: Yes, but what is the book about? What does it say? Some content has to be inserted.

When the general content is interesting, describes the book, and is correct grammatically and stylistically, the editor can move on to the final step.

Are the facts accurate?

Take one last look at names, dates, and places. Too much work has gone into all this to leave a silly mistake. Some annotations give grounds to check.

Annotation: World War II intrudes on the already troubled life of *Eleanor*, handicapped by a read-

ing disability that makes college seem impossible. Ironically, the war frees *Karen* to accept herself and pursue her own life.

Comment: What have Eleanor's problems to do with Karen? Checking shows that there is only one character; a mistake has been made with the name.

Annotation: A continuous narrative of the Bible *from Genesis to Exodus*, told in 168 stories in simple language.

Comment: It's possible; there is a great deal of story material in the first two books of the Bible. But that's not very far into the Bible; checking is justified, and shows that the annotation should read "from Genesis to Revelation"—the whole Bible.

Annotation: Historical tale of love, courtly splendor, rebellion, and

royal tragedy. Portrays the reign of Richard III, his fragile and tender relationship with Queen Anne, and the fiery battle at *Armageddon*.

Comment: He met his Armageddon at Bosworth Field. Don't leave the literary allusion; substitute the correct place.

Even without something that catches the attention, verify the basic facts with the background material and, if necessary, with the book.

Appendix

The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) of the Library of Congress produces and distributes books on disc, on cassette, and in braille format to eligible readers. Annotations are created for each title in this special library collection of classics, best-sellers, science fiction, gothic novels, mysteries, westerns, how-to, and other fiction and nonfiction books.

Blind and physically handicapped readers are introduced to the NLS collection through annotations. Current books, for example, are described in *Talking Book Topics* and *Braille Book Review*, two bimonthly magazines. Each edition of these magazines contains an order form for readers to check off and return to one of the 160 cooperating libraries in the NLS network. Annotations are also used in biennial catalogs as well as in four subject bibliographies produced for readers each year. In addition, annotations appear in the NLS computer-produced microfiche catalog of more than 25,000 entries and on book cards.

This publication is the outgrowth of a six-month study of annotations. The study was originated to evaluate the language and content of annotations in relation to their primary purpose of informing readers and their secondary uses within the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) and the network of cooperating libraries. It was developed in two parts: a five-phase procedure devoted to analysis of annotations and production practices, and a survey of blind and physically handicapped readers to determine their needs and interests in presentation of book announcements.

Analysis procedures. The five activities covered were:

1. Initial evaluation of current practices as compared with accepted practices of English language style.
2. Review of files for historical perspective (including previous drafts of manuals). Evaluation of current adherence to stated objectives based on specific examples.
3. Analysis of book announcements presented to readers through *Talking Book Topics* and *Braille Book Review*, and the process by which they are created, verified, transmitted, and prepared for publication.
4. Analysis of a sampling of retrospective annotations for style and conformity to guidelines.

5. Identification of other annotation sources or options; comparison of quality with accepted English style, conformance with objectives, and reader requirements; relationship to current annotation writing practices. Preliminary reports were prepared for each of these phases. More than 2000 annotations were analyzed as part of these activities.

Survey mailings and responses. The survey instrument was printed in 18-point type and sent to 441 patrons selected at random from the *Talking Book Topics* mailing list. It consisted of a cover letter, the survey form, and a print edition of *Talking Book Topics*. A second mailing was sent two months later to 355 patrons from the first list who had not responded. It consisted of a new cover letter and the survey form.

The response to the first mailing was 83 valid surveys plus 21 returns (deceased, moved, refused, etc.) for a total of 104. Eighteen of these replies came during the time the second mailing was being prepared, so that only 86, not 104, names were removed from the list for the second mailing.

The response to the second mailing was 108 valid surveys plus 9 returns, for a total of 117.

The total response from both mailings was 221. This is a 50.1 percent overall response; 23.58 percent on the first mailing of 441 and 32.96 percent on the second mailing of 355 (26.53 percent of the original group).

Breakdowns by age and education

<i>Age</i>	First Mailing	Second Mailing	Total
Under 15	3	7	10
16-25	3	10	13
26-40	5	12	17
41-65	29	20	49
66 and over	37	51	88
Totals	77	100	177

(Plus 14 who did not answer the question and 30 returns)

<i>Education</i>	First Mailing	Second Mailing	Total
Grades 1-4	3	6	9
Grades 5-8	15	20	35
High School	37	40	77
College	10	9	19
College Graduate	5	11	16
Post Graduate	6	11	17
Totals	76	97	173
(Plus 18 who did not answer the question and 30 returns)			

Survey and Results

- Item 1. We would like to ask you some questions about the books announced in *Talking Book Topics*. The recorded-disc and the large-type editions of this magazine contain descriptions of each book.
- A. Please check if you:
 - Listen to the disc (109)
 - Read the magazine (79)
 - Read only the order form (24)
 - Use none of this information (20)
 - Didn't answer (9)
 - B. Do you use the book descriptions to help you select books?
 - Always (113)
 - Usually (79)
 - Seldom (20)
 - Never (13)
 - Didn't answer (16)
- Item 2. If you use the book descriptions, please complete this section.
If not, go on to Question 3.
- A. Do you find that the book descriptions are accurate summaries that make you want to read the book?
 - Always (74)
 - Usually (123)
 - Seldom (9)
 - Never (3)

- B. If you have checked that the book descriptions are seldom or never accurate, is it because:
Book descriptions are wrong about the contents of books? (0)
Book descriptions don't emphasize the main point of the book? (14)
Mood (funny, tragic, suspenseful, etc.) is not as described? (11)
Other, specify: (16)

Item 3. If you seldom or never use the book descriptions, how do you select books? (Please check as many as apply to you.)

- Use other book reviews (12)
Member of family chooses (38)
Librarian chooses (35)
Friends recommend (23)
Other, specify: (35)

Item 4. Next we would like you to look at the book descriptions in the enclosed issue of *Talking Book Topics*.

- A. Are there any book descriptions that you find especially interesting, whether or not you like the subject of the books?
Yes (103) No (49)
If yes, please give book numbers:

Please indicate which of the reasons below apply to the book numbers you listed: (Check all that apply.)

- Makes subject sound entertaining or worthwhile (104)
Presents information clearly (70)
Includes enticing details (38)
Would have liked the subject or author no matter what the annotation said (47)
Other, specify: (18)

- B. Are there any book descriptions that would make you avoid books on subjects you usually enjoy?
Yes (20) No (140)
If yes, please give book numbers:

Please indicate which of the reasons below apply to these book numbers: (Check all that apply.)

- Doesn't give enough information (18)
Gives incorrect information about the book (2)

Sounds dull (15)

Other, specify: (33)

In the items with space for comment, eighteen people wrote comments favorable toward the practice of indicating the presence of sex and strong language; no one mentioned disliking this information. Seven people spoke of the need for more detail. People connected with institutions or groups described specific program needs. Many used the comment spaces to discuss the kind of books they read most, or to express appreciation of the program.

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